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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: BRV CALLS ANTONINI INDICTMENTS A U.S. PLOT

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 002336
[1](#)B. BUENOS AIRES 002331

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In a December 12 press release Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro denounced the Justice Department's arrest of three Venezuelans and one Uruguayan as "a U.S. plot to smear progressive governments in South America". Information and Communication Minister William Lara later told a government TV station that the arrests were part of an effort to smear President Hugo Chavez' international image. Opposition print and electronic media have been gleefully blaring the details of "Valijagate", speculating as to the ties the arrested Venezuelans may have to senior BRV figures. Government controlled media have been remarkably quiet about the affair, limiting their commentary to brief quotes from Maduro and Lara disparaging U.S. motives. To some extent The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) so far is ignoring the substance of an embarrassing issue and trying to frame the arrests as an American conspiracy. End Summary.

Government Reaction

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a December 12 press release, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro condemned the indictment of three Venezuelans and one Uruguayan in Miami as "a U.S. attempt to damage the image of South America's new leadership". Maduro claimed the United States government and domestic and international right-wingers were behind the Antonini suitcase incident in August, and that the arrests had been timed to coincide with President Chavez' signing of an Energy Security Agreement with Argentina. He added that the timing of the arrests was an attempt to "muddy the advances of progressive South American governments that started the Banco del Sur and the inauguration of Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner". Maduro accused the U.S. of "opening a judicial war to justify their political, psychological and media war against the BRV."

[1](#)3. (SBU) During his December 13 appearance on the government TV talk show "In Confidence," Information and Communication Minister William Lara called the arrests an attempt to undermine the inauguration of new Argentine President Cristina Kirchner, the December 13 visit of Brazilian President Lula to Venezuela, and the image of Hugo Chavez." Lara said the U.S. was involved in a "subtle, but vainglorious, attempt to tell President Fernandez de Kirchner to stay away from Hugo Chavez."

Local Media Reaction

14. (SBU) Opposition media bannered the revelations of federal indictments for three Venezuelans connected to the Antonini affair on December 13. Globovision television began transmitting Spanish CNN coverage of the indictments late on December 12 and leading dailies "El Universal" and "El Nacional" carried the department of Justice press release and the indictments on their websites. In the last two days coverage continues as local media carry details of the FBI investigation and report the furious Argentine reaction.

15. (SBU) Interestingly, the intense coverage by independent media contrasts markedly with the virtual silence from BRV-affiliated outlets. Government daily "Vea," BRV affiliated daily "Ultimas Noticias", and even the official blog "apporea.org" have pointedly downplayed - or even ignored- the issue. Coverage from official sources has been limited to a few short articles quoting FM Maduro, Information Minister Lara and President Kirchner.

Comment

16. (C) Once again the BRV is ignoring the substance of the embarrassing issue and framing the incident as an American attack on progressive Latin American leaders. Bolivarian media coverage to date may reflect the government's desire to bury this issue, as well as its hope that if the scandal cannot go away, at least it can shift the blame to the United States government. End Comment.
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